POLITICAL PERSUASION IN A DIGITAL REALITY

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Course description

This course introduces the key arguments about political persuasion within the field of political behaviour and will critically assess the relevance of these arguments in a digital context. The first part of the course will introduce the classical arguments about political persuasion. We will cover the following questions: Which actors have traditionally been understood as influential political actors and why? What are the mechanisms by which these actors are influencing their audience? We will go through the main actors and arguments one by one. This part of the course will introduce the classical arguments for the persuasive power of parties, friends, media, and celebrities.

In the second part of the course, we will critically assess the relevance of these persuasive mechanisms in a digital context. To do so, we start discussing the structural differences between political persuasion online and offline, and if such a distinction is even meaningful. In this block, students will be introduced to more qualitative and critical contemporary diagnoses of "the digital." These texts are meant to introduce key academic discussions of the digital spaces. How do we conceptualize the digital? What is structurally different in this space? This part of the course will give students a good starting point for further research if they are interested in the digital sphere. In the final part, we will look at more modern digital actors, such as influencers, YouTubers, streamers, etc., and discuss their role in politics. This session will introduce state-of-the-art literature on the persuasive power of modern digital actors. We will discuss how they have been theorized and the persuasive mechanisms driving their influence.

Students will hand in a short essay and do a presentation discussing the role of such modern digital actors in politics. For example, are the current arguments capturing all the mechanisms at play? If not, which are missing? What are the potentials and disadvantages of modern digital actors in politics? Can all actors utilize the digital space to the same extent? Or is it more suitable for some than others?

Learning Outcomes

- Students will be given a toolkit to link policy debates about digital actors to classical arguments in political behaviour, giving them a strong foundation to critically reflect upon arguments presented to them and form their own.

- Students will be introduced to the key arguments about political persuasion from the literature on political behaviour.

- Students will be introduced to contemporary diagnoses and the debate about the digital sphere, including computational social science and communication studies.

- Students will be introduced to state-of-the-art literature on digital actors and their role in politics.

- Students will gain experience engaging with research from various disciplines.

Inclusivity and Gender Pronouns

<u>Gender Pronouns:</u> All gender expressions and gender identities are affirmed in this course. I welcome you to correct me on your name or gender pronoun if I make a mistake. If you have concerns, please contact me in person or by email, whichever is most comfortable for you.

<u>Inclusivity:</u> This course strives to be an inclusive learning community, respecting those of differing backgrounds and beliefs. As a community, we aim to be respectful to all students in this class, regardless of race, ethnicity, class background and socio-economic status, religion, gender identity or sexual orientation.

<u>Syllabus:</u> The syllabus of this course reflects the field, which primarily focuses on perspectives from the Global North. I have made an effort to include authors from diverse backgrounds while ensuring you are introduced to both the state-of-the-art research and foundational arguments. If you have suggestions for materials incorporating more perspectives from the Global South, please feel free to share them with me so I can consider them for future iterations of the course.

Mandatory Requirements

There are four mandatory requirements to pass the course. They will all contribute to the final grade.

- Actively participation (15 %)

- Presentation (40 %)

- Discussant (5 %)

- Essay (40 %)

Active Participation

Students must attend min. 80 % of sessions of the block course and participate actively for passing. Active engagement in class involves asking questions, participating in discussions, and sharing your reflections on the assigned readings. Your contributions are essential to creating a thoughtful and dynamic learning environment. You are expected to read the assigned texts before each class, as the teaching will be structured with the assumption that everyone has engaged with the material. One of the primary learning outcomes of this course is to critically reflect on the arguments presented and develop your own perspectives. To achieve this, it is essential to engage with the assigned readings. I have assigned a lot of literature as optional reading. I do not expect you to read it all; consider it recommended literature for further reading on this topic.

You are, however, **not** required to agree with all the texts. On the contrary, you are encouraged to reflect critically on the text and form your own opinions about them. This implies thinking about the following questions while reading: What is the text's main argument? What are the assumptions? Do you agree with them? Do you trust the findings? Think about in which circumstance the argument holds and which circumstances it does not. What could the authors have done differently or better? What questions remain unanswered? (Further guidance on how to read effectively can be found in Macartan Humphreys' "How to Read" and the University of Lucerne's Guidelines POLSEM (2023)).

The Presentation

Presentations will be conducted individually or in groups of two to three students, depending on the number of participants enrolled in the course. We finalize presentation schedule together in the first session. Each presentation will be allocated 30 minutes: approximately 15 minutes for the presentation itself, 5 minutes for the discussant's comments, and 5 minutes for audience feedback. I will use the final 5 minutes to provide my feedback.
Presenters must upload a draft version of their slides to the Presentations folder in OLAT by 20 March 2026 to give the discussant sufficient time to prepare. The slides can be changed afterwards; the purpose of this deadline is mainly to allow the discussants to familiarize themselves with the content before the presentation.

The Aim of the Presentation:
The presentation should build on the discussions in Session 8, where we discuss modern digital actors and their role in politics. Students or groups should select a digital actor that was not discussed in class (e.g., YouTubers, streamers, etc.) and address the following questions:

- Which actor are you focusing on? What are the characteristics of this actor, and in which digital context do they operate?

- Which existing theories best explain the political persuasion of this actor? (You are welcome to introduce theoretical arguments beyond the syllabus.) What are the main arguments and assumptions of these theories?

- What can be explained when analyzing this actor through the chosen theoretical lens, and what cannot? Are the current arguments capturing all the mechanisms at play? If not, which are missing?

- Propose a research question for a potential thesis based on your analysis.

Different actors will be assigned to each group during class.

The Discussant

Each student should sign up as a discussant for another student's presentation. The role of the discussant is to prepare and deliver comments on the presentation. Please familiarize yourself with the slides before the presentation and prepare some comments and questions for the presenter. While you can prepare questions in advance, not all information may be in the slides, so be ready to adjust your questions if your original ones are addressed during the presentation. The discussant should speak for around 2-3 minutes, and their intervention should be constructive, aimed at clarifying or advancing the ideas presented.

The Essay

Each student has to submit a 3-page essay outlining the argument and research question of the presentation. The essay should build on the comments of the presentation. The course is structured as an ongoing learning process, where you get to work on your idea in the workshop, presentation, discussion, and final essay. If you do it well and put in time and effort, the final essay will provide a good starting point for thinking about thesis topics and research questions.

Program

Day 1: 06.03.2026

S1: Political persuasion: The big picture
Time and class: 9.15 – 10.45 in room X

S2: Political parties and their influence
Time and class: 11.00 – 12.30 in room X

S3: Why friends matters.

Time and class: 14.00 – 15.30 in room X

S4: The history of Media effects
Time and class: 15.45 – 17.15 in room X

Day 2: 27.03.2026

S5: Reality TV and Celebrities
Time and class: 9.15 – 10.45 in room X

S6: Digital spaces: A new arena for politics
Time and class: 11.00 – 12.30 in room X

S7: Contemporary diagnoses of the digital space
Time and class: 14.00 – 15.30 in room X

Day 3: 28.03.2025

S8: Selective exposure and echo chambers
Time and class: 9.15 – 10.45 in room X

S9: Modern Digital Actors and Their Role in Politics
Time and class: 11.00 – 12.30 in room X

S10: Writing workshop: The art of introduction
Time and class: 14.00 – 15.30 in room X

S11: Writing session: work on introduction
Time and class: 15.45 – 17.15 in room X

Day 4: 22.03.2025

S12: Presentations
Time and class*: 9.15 – 15.30 in room X (Schedule for presentation and discussants will be announced.)

Syllabus

Part 1: Classical Theories of Political Persuasion

The first part of the course introduces the key arguments on political persuasion in political behaviour. We will examine actors traditionally seen as influential and explore the mechanisms behind their persuasive power.

Session 1: Political persuasion: The big picture

Time and class: *9.15 – 10.45 in room X*

In this class, we draw on key theories of political behaviour to understand actors of political persuasion. But what is political persuasion? What is political behaviour? Moreover, how are they different? In this session, we will position the argument presented in this class in the border field of political science and political communication.

Optional readings:

- Green, D. P., Palmquist, B., Schickler, E. 2002. 'Evidence of the Long-Term Persistence of Adults' Political Predispositions'. *The Journal of Politics* 60(3): 870–883. JSTOR link.

- Kalla, J. L., Broockman, D. E. 2018. 'The Minimal Persuasive Effects of Campaign Contact in General Elections: Evidence from 49 Field Experiments'. *American Political Science Review* 112(1): 148–166. Cambridge link.

- Achen, Christopher H., and Larry M. Bartels. 2017a. 'Democratic Ideals and Realities'. In *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*, Princeton University Press, 1–20. doi:10.2307/j.ctvc7770q.5.

- Achen, Christopher H., and Larry M. Bartels. 2017b. 'Groups and Power: Toward a Realist Theory of Democracy'. In *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*, Princeton University Press, 297–328. doi:10.2307/j.ctvc7770q.15.

- Achen, Christopher H. 1975. 'Mass Political Attitudes and the Survey Response'. *American Political Science Review* 69(4): 1218–31. doi:10.2307/1955282.

Session 2: Political parties and their influence

Time and class: *11.00 – 12.30 in room X*

Thinking about political persuasion, one of the first actors that comes to mind is political parties. But how do parties influence people's attitudes? Some of the assigned texts argue that political parties help minimize the complexity of politics so that citizens do not have to rely on complex and detailed information to make sense of the world. Instead, they can rely on informational shortcuts and cues provided by the parties. Others argue that the persuasive power of parties does not lie in the information shortcut but in the in-group dynamics and the feeling of belonging to a group.

- Slothuus, Rune, and Martin Bisgaard. 2021. *Party over Pocketbook? How Party Cues Influence Opinion When Citizens Have a Stake in Policy.* American Political Science Review 115(3): 1090–96. doi:10.1017/S0003055421000332.

- Iyengar, Shanto, Gaurav Sood, and Yphtach Lelkes. 2012. *Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization.* Public Opinion Quarterly 76(3): 405–31. doi:10.1093/poq/nfs038.

Optional readings:

- Tilley, James, and Sara B. Hobolt. 2011. *Is the Government to Blame? An Experimental Test of How Partisanship Shapes Perceptions of Performance and Responsibility.* The Journal of Politics 73(2): 316–30. doi:10.1017/S0022381611000168.

- Kahneman, Daniel. 2003. *A Perspective on Judgment and Choice.* American Psychologist 58(9): 697–720.

- Tajfel, Henri, and John Turner. 1979. *An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict.* In *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, eds. William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel. Monterey, Calif: Brooks Cole Publishing.

Session 3: Why friends matter

Time and class: 14.00 – 15.30 in room X

Some argue that our friends, family, and people with whom we interact daily have more persuasive power than the media and parties. But what is the persuasive power of our friends? How do they influence us, and why? This will be the focus of the session, where we will read a classical piece formulated in 1968 by Lazarsfeld.

- Lazarsfeld, Paul F., Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet. 1968. *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign*. Columbia University Press, **Chapters 5 and 16**. doi:10.7312/laza93930.

Session 4: The history of media effects

Time and class: 15.45 – 17.15 in room X

Can the media change our minds? Or just direct our attention? Moreover, what power lies in the control of the agenda? And what about the fact that most people prefer entertainment over the news? These are some of the major discussions among media scholars. In this session, students will be introduced to the main arguments for and against the persuasive power of media. We will read chapters from Arceneaux & Johnson (2013) and Kim (2025) to provide an overview. I have assigned some relevant and more theoretical chapters from Zaller (1992) as additional readings for curious students.

- Arceneaux, Kevin, and Martin Johnson. 2013. *Changing Minds or Changing Channels?: Partisan News in an Age of Choice*. University of Chicago Press, **Chapters 1, 2, and 8**.

- Kim, Eunji. The American Mirage: How Reality TV Upholds the Myth of Meritocracy. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2025. Print. **Chapters 1 and 2**.

Optional readings:

- Zaller, John R. 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, **Chapters 1, 3, and 11**. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511818691.

Session 5: Reality TV & celebrities

Time and class: *9.15 – 10.45 in room X*

In this session, we focus on reality TV and celebrities as the final persuasive actors. As discussed in the previous session, most people spend the majority of their media consumption on entertainment content. Building on this insight, we begin by examining reality TV's ability to convey political messages and affect public opinion, using chapters from Kim (2025) as the starting point for our discussion. In the second part of the session, we shift the focus to celebrities. Celebrities command large audiences and attract significant media attention, but how effective are they at mobilizing these audiences for political purposes? What mechanisms lead voters to trust a movie star or a singer more than professional politicians? These questions will guide the discussion and readings for this session.

- Alrababa'h, Ala', William Marble, Salma Mousa, and Alexandra A. Siegel. 2021. *Can Exposure to Celebrities Reduce Prejudice? The Effect of Mohamed Salah on Islamophobic Behaviors and Attitudes.* American Political Science Review 115(4): 1111–28. doi:10.1017/S0003055421000423.

- Kim, Eunji. The American Mirage: How Reality TV Upholds the Myth of Meritocracy. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2025. Print. **Chapters 3 and 7**

Optional reading:

- Kosenko, Kami A., Andrew R. Binder, and Ryan Hurley. 2016. *Celebrity Influence and Identification: A Test of the Angelina Effect.* Journal of Health Communication 21(3): 318–26. doi:10.1080/10810730.2015.1064498.

- Jackson, David J., Anthony J. Nownes, and Thomas Norton. 2024. *Taylor Swift as a Potential Celebrity Political Endorser.* American Politics Research: 1532673X241269863. doi:10.1177/1532673X241269863.

Part 2: Digital Spaces, Digital Actors and Online Political Persuasion

Whether it be an influencer, streamer, politician, or celebrity, most actors engaged in political persuasion today are - to a greater or lesser extent - entering into digital spaces to get their message across. To be able to discuss how political persuasion functions in this digital reality, we have to take a step back and look at the digital space more generally. What is different in digital spaces? What are the challenges for politics in digital spaces? What are the potentials? Moreover, is this distinction between offline and online even meaningful? After discussing this, we will turn to more modern digital actors and discuss their role in politics. Can influencers, YouTubers, and streamers affect people's attitudes, and if so, how?

Session 6: Digital spaces: A new arena for politics

Time and class: *11.00 – 12.30 in room X*
This class will discuss the structural differences between traditional and digital media, such as social media platforms. We will discuss differences across platforms: what are the different affordances, and why do they matter? Moreover, we will discuss how information flows in a digital context. Using memes as a starting point, we will discuss what happens to messages when posted on social media platforms and discuss the increasing need for cross-platform analysis.

- Burgess, Jean, Alice Emily Marwick, and Thomas Poell. 2018. *The Sage Handbook of Social Media*. London: Sage Publications., **Chapter 5, 13, and 22**.

Optional readings:

- Bennett, W. Lance, and Alexandra Segerberg. 2012. 'The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics'. *Information, Communication Society* 15(5): 739–68. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661.

- Lee, Sunah. 2024. '"I Had My Hair Cut Today to Share Women_Short_Cut_Campaign": Feminist Selfies Protesting Misogyny'. *Social Media + Society* 10(3): 20563051241274667. doi:10.1177/20563051241274667.

Session 7: Contemporary Diagnoses of the digital space

Time and class: *14.00 – 15.30 in room X*

In this session, we will introduce a set of different perspectives and characteristics of the digital space. These texts focus on different dimensions of the digital space, and they often disagree in their diagnoses of the digital space. When reading, students are encouraged to reflect critically and to write down what they think are the most convincing arguments and descriptions of the digital space.

- Tucker, Joshua A., Yannis Theocharis, Margaret E. Roberts, and Pablo Barberá. 2017. *From Liberation to Turmoil: Social Media and Democracy.* Journal of Democracy 28(4): 46–59. doi:10.1353/jod.2017.0064.

- Kaufmann, Mareile, and Julien Jeandesboz. 2016. *Politics and 'the Digital': From Singularity to Specificity.* European Journal of Social Theory 20(3): 309–28. doi:10.1177/1368431016677976.

Optional readings:

- Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power.* First edition. New York: PublicAffairs, **Chapter 1**.

- Aradau, Claudia, and Tobias Blanke. 2022. *Algorithmic Reason: The New Government of Self and Other.* Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/oso/9780192859624.001.0001.

- Dijck, José van. 2018. *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

- Persily, Nathaniel, and Joshua A. Tucker, eds. 2020. *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform.* 1st ed. Cambridge University Press. https://www.cambridge.org/core/product/identifier/9781108890960/type/book.

- Russell, Stuart J. 2019. *Human Compatible: Artificial Intelligence and the Problem of Control.* London: Allen Lane/Penguin Books.

Session 8: Selective exposure and echo chambers

Time and class: 9.15 – 10.45 in room X

In this session, we examine debates about information flows in digital spaces, with particular attention to selective exposure and algorithmic curation. We discuss how these dynamics shape what political information people encounter online and review key empirical evidence on the existence and strength of echo chambers, asking whether they exist at all or whether alternative concepts better capture patterns of political information exposure online.

- Nyhan, B., Settle, J., Thorson, E. et al. Like-minded sources on Facebook are prevalent but not polarizing. Nature 620, 137–144 (2023). doi:10.1038/s41586-023-06297-w

- Messing, S., Westwood, S. J. (2013). Selective Exposure in the Age of Social Media: Endorsements Trump Partisan Source Affiliation When Selecting News Online: Endorsements Trump Partisan Source Affiliation When Selecting News Online. Communication Research, 41(8), 1042-1063. doi:10.1177/0093650212466406 (Original work published 2014).

Optional reading:

- Eytan Bakshy et al. (2015). Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on Facebook. Science 348,1130-1132. DOI:10.1126/science.aaa1160.

- Guess, Andrew, et al. "Avoiding the echo chamber about echo chambers." Knight Foundation 2.1 (2018): 1-25.

- F. Huszár,S.I. Ktena,C. O'Brien,L. Belli,A. Schlaikjer, & M. Hardt, (2022) Algorithmic amplification of politics on Twitter, Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A. 119 (1) e2025334119, doi:10.1073/pnas.2025334119.

- Magdalena Wojcieszak et al. (2022). Most users do not follow political elites on Twitter; those who do show overwhelming preferences for ideological congruity.Sci. Adv.8,. DOI:10.1126/sciadv.abn9418

- Persily, Nathaniel, and Joshua A. Tucker, eds. 2020. *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform*. 1st ed. Cambridge University Press. Link **Chapter 3**

- Bakshy, E., S. Messing, and L. A. Adamic. 2015. 'Asymmetric Ideological Segregation in Exposure to Political News on Facebook'. *Science* 348(6239): 1130–32. doi:10.1126/science.ade7138.

- Guess, A., J. Nagler, and J. Tucker. 2023. 'Reshares on Social Media Amplify Political News but Do Not Detectably Affect Beliefs or Opinions'. *Science* 381(6663): 1107–12. doi:10.1126/science.add8424.

Session 9: Modern Digital Actors and Their Role in Politics?

Time and class*: 11.00 – 12.30 in room X*

In this session, we try to gather the pieces. The focus for this session will be on more contemporary actors, such as influencers, YouTubers, streamers, etc. We will discuss the persuasive power of these actors. We will read studies of the persuasive power of digital influencers and online streamers. Using the insights from the previous sessions, students are encouraged to think critically about the theorization of these more modern digital actors. Do the arguments convince you, and why? Would these arguments apply to all types of digital actors?

- Schmuck, Desirée, Melanie Hirsch, Anja Stevic, and Jörg Matthes. 2022. *Politics – Simply Explained? How Influencers Affect Youth's Perceived Simplification of Politics, Political Cynicism, and Political Interest.* The International Journal of Press/Politics 27(3): 738–62. doi:10.1177/19401612221088987

- Klüver, Heike. 2024. 'Social Influencers and Election Outcomes.' Comparative Political Studies: 00104140241306955. doi:10.1177/00104140241306955.

Optional reading:

- Kowert, Rachel, and Emory Daniel. 2021. *The One-and-a-Half Sided Parasocial Relationship: The Curious Case of Live Streaming. Computers in Human Behavior Reports* 4: 100150. doi:10.1016/j.chbr.2021.100150.

- Dekoninck, Heleen, and Desiree Schmuck. 2022. *The Mobilizing Power of Influencers for Pro-Environmental Behavior Intentions and Political Participation.* Environmental Communication 16(4): 458–72. doi:10.1080/17524032.2022.2049072.

- Horton, Donald, and R. Richard Wohl. 1956. *Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction. Psychiatry* 19(3): 215–29. doi:10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049.

Part 3: Making an argument

One of the main learning outcomes of this course is for students to learn how to *critically reflect upon arguments presented and form your own*. An important part of this skill is formulating and communicating arguments convincingly. In the third part of the source, we will work more interactively to practice writing. This will give you time to prepare for and improve the final essay.

Session 10-11: Writing workshop: The art of introduction

Time and class: 09.15 – 12.30 in room X

In this session, I will introduce a structure for writing an academic introduction. The structure is straightforward, but adapting it in your own writing is a difficult, nevertheless, a very helpful exercise. It works well for introductions in academic writing but also very well as a template for presenting new ideas (e.g., choosing a topic for the master thesis). In this session, students will work independently, trying to adapt their thoughts about the presentation and the final essay to this framework. It is not a requirement to have a first draft of the essay ready before the class. The content of the presentation is sufficient to follow the exercise.

- Guidelines on How to Do Research. Department of Political Science, University of Lucerne (September 2023).

- Introduction. Inframethodology, Thomas Basbøll.

- How to Write Paragraphs. Medium blog post (March 2016).

Optional Readings

- Good Abstracts: A Template. Fabrizio Gilardi (24 February, 2021).

- Writing a Master's Thesis in Four Not-So-Easy Steps. Frederik Hjorth (August 3, 2020).